Original Article

Investigation of skills acquired by athletes during their sporting career

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ABSTRACT

The present study was implemented in the context of the Erasmus+ program titled "AFTERMATCH - Life Beyond Sport", the purpose of which was to investigate whether athletes acquire any skills from their involvement with sport that they can transfer in their profession after they finish their sporting career. The methodology employed was quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews). The sample consisted of 23 active athletes, 64 former athletes and 39 employers / HR managers of companies in five different European Union countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia). A descriptive approach was used for the data analysis. The results showed that athletes acquire certain skills from their engagement in sport and those who realize it and use them make their transition to the labour market easier. **Keywords:** Sport; Athletes; Skills; Competencies; Career Transition; Labour Market.

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INTRODUCTION

The benefits produced by sport activities at multiple levels (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2008), the increasing sport audiences for public and private sport events, the increasing number of sport-related goods and services offered, and the increasing sport-related jobs created in the labour market led to a growing impact of sport on European strategies and programs. In line with these trends, and in order to ensure a sustainable, integrated and fair development of the sport sector in the continent the European Commission (EC) launched the European Work Plan on Sport 2014 – 2017, which requires the EC and Member States to prioritize the following key topics: 1) the integrity of sport (anti-doping, fight against match-fixing, protection of minors, good governance and gender equality), 2) the economic dimension of sport (sustainable financing of sport, legacy of major sport events, economic benefits deriving from sport and innovation) and 3) the role of sport in society (health education through physical activity, volunteering, employment in sport, education and training in sport, including "dual career" promotion).

With relation to the last topic, the "EU Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes" (2012) encapsulates the requirement for athletes to successfully initiate, develop and finalize a sporting career as a part of their whole life, identifies and proposes arrangements in favour of athletes' education during their sporting career, and promotes the attainment of a professional career after competing in sport is over. Since 2009, the EU has provided financial support to 18 transnational programs to address the various aspects of Dual Career (EU, 2009; 2013a; 2013b; 2016), including stakeholder networking, awareness-raising and data collection through consultation and research. However, only few of them focused specifically on the "after the end of the sporting career" period. Even less actions investigated whether athletes acquire any skills from their sporting activity, which could be meaningfully transferred and used in their professional employment after their sporting career.

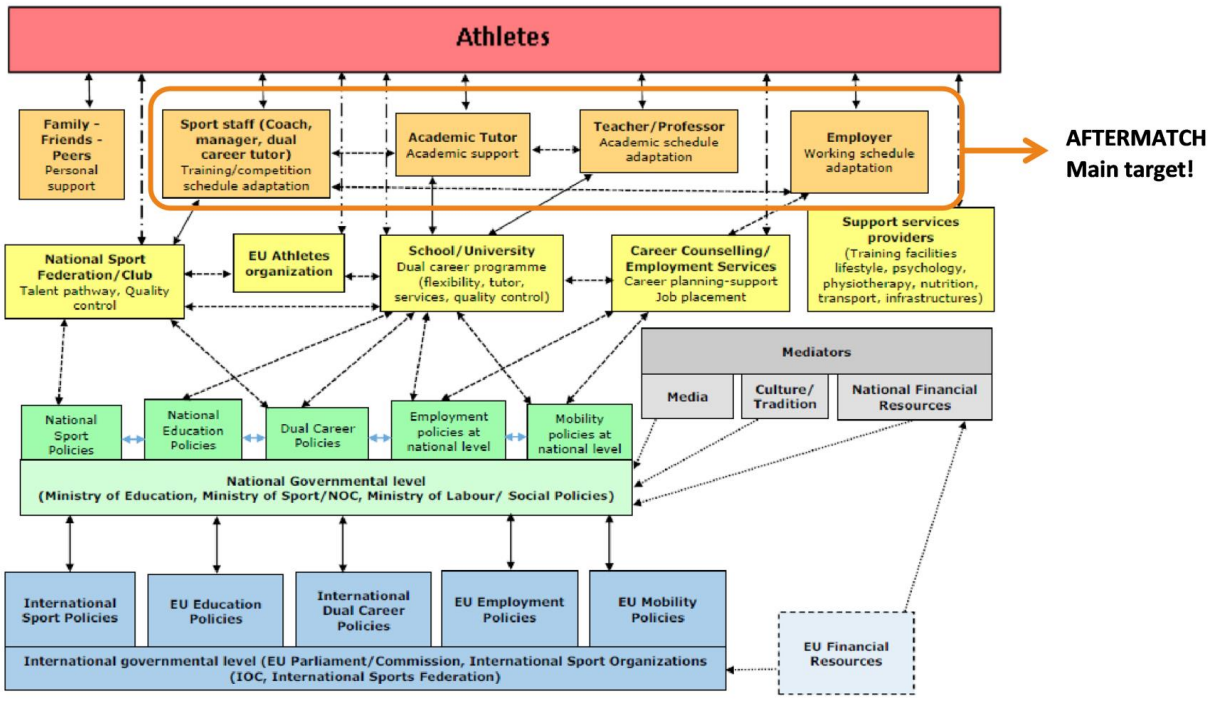

Figure 1. European dual career stakeholders as they were defined by the AFTERMATCH project.

It is worth noting that most programs focus on the "micro-dimension" (i.e. the reasons why athletes engage in sport) and the "macro-dimension" (i.e. practices that are effective to athletes in both the sports and the educational environment) of the subject, while only two programs have focused on the "intermediate" dimension of the subject (i.e. skills the athletes acquire during their sporting life). One of them was the "AFTERMATCH - Life Beyond Sport" project,[1] which addressed three main categories: a) athletes, b) teachers /coaches, and c) employers / HR managers (Figure 1).

Despite differences in methodological approaches, these programs have provided useful insights into understanding the phenomenon of Dual Career, providing possible solutions for the development, transfer and / or application of innovative practices for wider scale initiatives at national and European level.

Review of literature

According to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (European Commission, ESCOpedia, 2017)[2], "…skill means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems"[3] and can be distinguished as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) or practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments), while "….competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development".[4] Sometimes the terms "skill" and "competence" are used as synonyms but they could be distinguished according to their scope. The term "skill" refers typically to the use of methods or instruments in a particular setting and in relation to defined tasks, while the term "competence" is broader and refers typically to the ability of a person - facing new situations and unforeseen challenges - to use and apply knowledge and skills in an independent and self-directed way. Generally, skills and competences are referred to as a whole range of technical, job-specific skills, which are usually easily observed, measured, trained and are closely connected with knowledge (Oxford Reference Dictionary).

In recent years, the EU Member States have extensively discussed about learning and the valorisation of skills and competences however acquired. In 2006, the EC put forward a recommendation that provided, for the first time, a European Reference Tool on Key Competences that outlined the different types of competences appropriate to each context and fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion, and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation. The framework sets out the following eight key competences: a) communication in the mother tongue, b) communication in foreign languages, c) mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, d) digital competence, e) learning to learn, f) social and civic competences, g) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and h) cultural awareness and expression (European Parliament, 2006).

In 2010, the EC launched the multilingual classification of European Skills, Competences, Qualifications & Occupations (ESCO) project with an open stakeholder consultation. DG Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, supported by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP),

[1]Designed and implemented by the following organizations: Forcoop Cora Venezia (Italy), Italian Federation of Canoe Kayak, Towarzystwo Sportowe Iron Man (Poland), Interactive Media Knowledge Transfer (Greece), Sports Federation of Maribor (Slovenia), Economic Institute of Maribor (Slovenia), Bulgarian Masters Federation (Bulgaria).

[2]https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/escopedia/European_Skills%252C_Competences%252C_Qualifications_and_Occupations_%2528ESCO%2529

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/escopedia/Skill

[4] https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/escopedia/Competence

coordinated the development and the continuous updating of the ESCO classification as part of the Europe 2020 strategy. Among the "hard" skills ESCO identifies skills and competences, which can be applied in a specific type of occupation either in specific sectors (sector-specific) or in a specific job position (job-specific). In between, ESCO defines cross-sector skills and competences that could be transferred from one occupation to another. ESCO classification identifies and categorizes skills, competences, qualifications and occupations relevant for the EU labour market, education and training. ESCO taxonomy and classification help us understand how all these terms could be used and what differentiate, for example, hard skills from transversal skills and competences (ESCOpedia, 2017).

On the other hand, transversal skills and competences are relevant to a broad range of occupations and sectors. They are often referred to as core skills, basic skills or soft skills, the cornerstone for the personal development of a person.[5] Transversal skills and competences are the building blocks for the development of the "hard" skills and competences required to succeed on the labour market. Wats and Wats (2009, p. 1) noted that, "…soft skills underpin effective performance in the workplace and are seen as a foundation for work readiness". They are usually intangible and closely connected with attitudes. The recognition of these skills and competences is still an open issue in the EU, however increasingly more efforts are made to give value and officially recognize them. According to Van Raalte, Allen, Brewer, Petitpas, and Andrews (1992) some of the most widely recognizable transversal skills developed by athletes during the sports career are the following: 1) *goal setting* (athletes learn to set short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals), 2) *focus* (athletes learn to block-out distractions and sharpen their focus on the things that are important), 3) *team building* (athletes learn how to co-exist with teammates, even the ones they don't like; this includes effective communication, conflict resolution, development of problem solving strategies within a group, team spirit and effort toward group goals, ego elimination, development of loyalty and trust in the efforts of others), 4) *motivation* (athletes learn the importance of motivation, especially during off-season conditioning; they get used to motivate themselves to work hard in order to be successful), 5) *resilience* (athletes often face stress, frustration and failure, but they swiftly recover, learn from successes and failures and move to the next action), 6) *time management* (athletes learn how to organize their time in order to balance a rigorous training program with travel, school and personal obligations, prioritizing tasks and responsibilities), 7) *confidence* (athletes learn how to be self-confident and develop a winning mind-set, usually in high pressured situations), 8) *discipline and responsibility* (athletes learn how to discipline themselves, develop strong commitment to practice, work hard and give maximum effort, while adhering to rules and guidelines, which is widely expected at the workplace), 9) *evaluation* (athletes learn to receive – offer criticism and evaluate situations), 10) *coaching – self-coaching* (athletes learn from mistakes and move forward), 11) *problem solving* (athletes face many kinds of problems, hurdles and difficulties and they try to overcome them).

In recent years attitudes towards learning, and consequently towards the recognition of skills and competences, have been changing. In the past, educational policies and practices approached "learning" as something which ceased as soon as a young person left school and skills and competences were much related to job and occupation. More recently, however, these policies have changed to actively recognize and reflect the fact that learning takes place throughout a person's life (Tough, 1997). According to Zimmerman (2002), the skills inherent to self-regulated learning include setting specific goals, adopting strategies for attaining goals, using time management skills, monitoring performance, and managing social and physical contexts. With this new awareness has emerged that a large amount of learning does not take place only inside the formal education system but also in other contexts (i.e., during work, volunteering, with family and friends, sport activities, etc.). As a result these areas of learning are beginning to gain more respect

[5] https://ec.europa.eu/esco/portal/escopedia/Skill_reusability_level

(Yasunaga, 2014). Labour market players, especially employers, have been developing an increasingly stronger awareness on the relevance of transversal skills and competences in the workplace, which they have reflected in Human Resource (HR) management policies and practices as well as in the recruitment and selection phases.

On the other side, in the last decades the labour market has been changing and employers' interest towards transferrable skills and competences has been increasing. Generally speaking, at European level all countries apply systems that support the recognition of transversal skills and competences and the valorisation of all kind of learning experiences. However, there is a widespread lack of a framework for the certification of non-formal and informal learning. Many efforts have been made to develop a European framework for the validation of skills and competences however acquired.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether athletes acquire any skills from their involvement in sport that they can transfer in their profession after they finish their sporting career.

Methodology

Methods

For the purposes of this study quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interview) methods were employed.

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of active athletes, former athletes and employers / HR managers.[6]

Instruments of measurement

In order to obtain an overview of the employment situation of former athletes in each partner's country an easy-to-fill, on-line questionnaire was created in Google Forms, which was divided in two parts: a) socio-demographic data (i.e., age, average sports career duration, level of education, employment status, etc.) and b) Likert-type questions (where 1 = fully disagree and 5 = fully agree), addressing the following topics: typology of job/tasks, level of utilization of sport-related skills acquired during the sport career, level of earnings, job stability, continuity with reference to the job experiences (if any) during the sport performance. The initial questionnaire was written in English, was back-to-back translated in all partners' country language and was filled-in by 23 active athletes and 64 former athletes (Table 1).

Table 1. Number of active / former participating athletes from each country

	Active athletes	Former athletes
Bulgaria	5	30
Greece	3	5
Italy	4	15
Poland	6	9
Slovenia	5	5
Total	23	64

[6] For the purposes of this study, an athlete was considered to be a person who as a member of a sport club competed for at least five years at an elite level.

Table 2. Number of interviews with active / former athletes and employers / HR managers of companies in each participating country

	Active athletes	Former athletes	Employers / HR managers
Bulgaria	5	30	5
Greece	5	5	5
Italy	4	15	15
Poland	6	9	4
Slovenia	5	10	15
Total	**25**	**69**	**44**

Moreover, 138 interviews were conducted using the focused-narrative interview, very similar to a semi-structured interview, with: a) 25 active athletes and 69 with former athletes in order to record their perceptions towards the skills they acquired during their sporting career and b) 44 employers / HR managers in order to collect their perceptions towards the sport-related skills that are most useful to a company (Table 2).

Data collection

The questionnaires were disseminated by the researchers of each country between April - June 2016, through direct emails, posts on Facebook pages and Tweets and were collected in the same way. The interviews were conducted either in person, or by phone, using a tape recorder. The interviewees were completely free to delve into their own experiences. Special attention was paid to creating an environment of trust towards the interviewer. The process was organized into three distinct parts: 1) the interviewees were invited to "narrate" their own life stories (the interviewer did not interrupt them and were active listeners), 2) the interviewer raised questions on topics, events or persons mentioned spontaneously, following the interviewee's order and language and 3) the interviewer asked questions on topics of interest to the study (i.e. can sport be combined with education? why did you choose this specific sport? what favours effective application of the dual career concept? do you know the usefulness of transversal skills that you acquired from sport in relation to your employment? have you ever thought an "exit strategy" from sport? when is the appropriate time to "exit"? which are the most useful sport-related skills? which values acquired in sport could be useful to companies?).

Informed consent

In all cases, the consent of those who participated was obtained for the use of the tape recorder. The name, institution, scientific and professional standing of the person conducting the interview were clearly indicated.

Method of analysis

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaires was performed with the Google statistics tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Age of athletes

Participating athletes from Bulgaria had the highest average age (52 years and 2 months), while athletes from Greece had the lowest (32 years and 8 months) (Table 3).

Average sports career duration

The average sports career duration of the participating athletes was the following for each country: Poland = 26 years, Bulgaria = 17 years, Italy = 15 years, Greece = 13 years, and Slovenia = 13 years.

Table 3. Youngest / oldest and average age of athletes

	Youngest athlete	Oldest athlete	Average age
Bulgaria	17	76	52 y 2 m
Greece	17	49	32 y 8 m
Italy	20	61	38 y 8 m
Poland	19	62	42 y 0 m
Slovenia	20	57	37 y 0 m
Average	-	-	**40y 5m**

Level of education

Participating athletes were well educated in all observed countries. More specifically, 33,6% had a higher education degree, 27% had a bachelor's degree, 35% had a master's degree, 2% had a Doctorate degree, while only 2,4% were educated on primary level (Table 4).

Table 4. Level of education

	Primary	Secondary/Technical/Vocational	Higher	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Bulgaria	0%	2%	4%	13%	79%	2%
Greece	0%	25%	14%	36%	24%	1%
Italy	2%	10%	34%	19%	30%	5%
Poland	10%	15%	16%	25%	33%	1%
Slovenia	0%	12%	32%	42%	12%	2%
Average	**2.4%**	**12.8%**	**20%**	**27%**	**35.6%**	**2.2%**

Employment status

The level of employment of all respondents was quite high. More specifically, 58.6% were employees and 29.6% were freelancers, while only 11.8% were unemployed (Table 5).

Table 5. Employment status

	Employed	Owner/freelancers	Unemployed
Bulgaria	76%	24%	0%
Greece	60%	30%	10%
Italy	47%	35%	18%
Poland	58%	34%	8%
Slovenia	52%	25%	23%
Average	58.6%	29.6%	11.8%

Type of employment

Most of the athletes (75%) had a permanent job (full time or part time), while the other 25% had a temporary one (Table 6).

Job stability

A high percentage (70%) of those with permanent, full time employment considered their jobs stable or very stable. Also, 72% of the entrepreneurs and free lancers considered their job as very stable, while only 8,2% thought that their employment situation was not stable enough (Table 7).

Table 6. Type of employment

	Permanent (full or part time)	Temporary (full or part time)
Bulgaria	90%	10%
Greece	65%	35%
Italy	86%	14%
Poland	77%	23%
Slovenia	57%	43%
Average	**75%**	**25%**

Table 7. Job stability of entrepreneurs / free lancers

	Very stable	Stable enough	Not stable enough
Bulgaria	100%	0%	0%
Greece	54%	38%	8%
Italy	53%	32%	15%
Poland	72%	28%	0%
Slovenia	82%	0%	18%
Average	**72%**	**70%**	**8.2%**

Satisfaction with actual job, job position, employment sectors and continuity with previous sport discipline
Regarding the level of satisfaction of the respondents with their job, 70% said that it was quite high (level 4-5), while the lowest level of satisfaction (level 1-2) for all countries was 10,6% (Table 8).

Table 8. Level of satisfaction with job (1 = very low, 5 = very high)

	1	2	3	4	5
Bulgaria	8%	16%	20%	20%	36%
Greece	2%	5%	24%	41%	28%
Italy	2%	2%	19%	49%	28%
Poland	0%	2%	13%	33%	52%
Slovenia	3%	13%	21%	39%	24%
Average	**3%**	**7.6%**	**19.4%**	**36.4%**	**33.6%**

Former athletes were asked to report on the level of continuity between involvement in sport and employment after their sporting career: 35.2% reported that there was continuity, 25.6% reported some continuity, while 39.2% reported that there was no continuity.

The analysis of interviews of athletes with a very diverse sports background presents a very important element. The risk associated with sports careers is particularly marked as it consists of a set of different profiles that are closely related to each other. Athletic careers lead to an "identity issue" (Taylor & Betz, 1983), that is, once professional change occurs, identity is deeply affected and runs the risk of being harmed if the change management is not done in the right way.

In the question of how sport can be combined with education, the answers from the interviews of former athletes varied from country to country, as education systems and learning styles differ.

Connection between sport and labour market, with a focus on which skills acquired during sport career are most suitable and used in the professional career after sport

The highest percentage of respondents was recorded in the sector "sport, leisure and tourism" (ranging from 15% - 30% in all countries), followed by "Teaching & Education" (27%) and "Engineering & Technicians" (18%). The level of connection between sport practiced and job is also a matter of "how many skills and competences" a former athlete acquired during their sporting career can be transferred and used in the labour market (Table 9).

Table 9. Employments sector

	%	Sectors
Bulgaria	22	Leisure tourist and sports sector
	22	Self – employed
	18	Media and web
	16	Public services and administration
	8	Education, university lecturers/teachers
	8	Foundations and federations
	4	Army and Police
	4	Lawyers and doctors
Greece	55	Public services and Armed Forces
	21	Leisure, sport (coaches and trainers) and tourism
	17	Teaching/training activities
	7	Administration and logistics/banking
Italy	28	Sales, marketing managers
	22	Sport sector
	20	Technicians
	11	Armed Forces
	11	Business consultant
	8	Researcher
Poland	59	Training and education
	13	Recreation and sport
	5	Marketing, advertising and PR
	3	Business, consulting and management
	3	Transport and logistics
	3	Law
	3	Sales
	2	Energy and utilities
	2	Public service and administration
Slovenia	31	Leisure, sport and tourism
	10	Public services and administration
	7	Accountancy, banking and finance
	7	Engineering and manufacturing

Most of the employees/HR Managers confirmed the importance and the effectiveness of sport as an additional criterion that affects the result of recruitment. Thus, the sporting background is considered as an essential element for the development of transversal skills alongside the various views related to it. To the question of whether sporting skills attach a value to the process of selecting a job, the answer is positive.

Level of application of skills acquired during sport career to job

The majority of the sample (57,2%) perceived a high level of application of the skills acquired during sport practice to a job, while 26% perceived an acceptable level and 16.8% perceived a poor level (Table 10).

Table 10. Level of application of skills acquired during sport career to job

	Poor	Acceptable	Good/Very Good
Bulgaria	25%	12%	62%
Greece	13%	21%	65%
Italy	21%	28%	52%
Poland	28%	5%	68%
Slovenia	43%	18%	39%
Average	26%	16.8%	57.2%

It is worth noting that most athletes' skills have been largely developed through practical training than through theoretical knowledge, as the skills acquired during training in sport cannot be considered "directly useful" for the labour market (with the exception of sport related jobs) as they are considered "simple skills". The interviews revealed that the profile of the "athlete" is something like "paradox" as their professional profile is highly specialized and could hardly be transferred to the labour market.

Employers and HR managers know that athletes (active and former) are people with a lot of skills and experiences, but when they start the interview process they do not include questions about their athletic engagement and the experiences deriving from it. The skills they consider important for their business are goal setting, initiative, communication / relationship skills, willingness to learn, teamwork, job management, organizational skills.

Transferable skills

In the question regarding whether athletes know the usefulness of transversal skills that they acquired from sport in relation to their employment, responses varied from country to country and from sport to sport. Athletes identified the following skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, creativity, commitment, leadership, planning, resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, critical thinking (Figure 2), as well discipline, psychological endurance, willingness to win, fair play, respect, will, resistance to high pressure, organization, skill, goal achievement, responsibility, willingness, self-confidence and perseverance in smaller percent.

It is worth noting that almost all employers ask the candidates for the type of sport they have exercised or exercise and at what level. The reasons behind this question are the skills and values that arise from sports activities. These abilities and values belong to the category of "transversal skills" such as self-confidence, teamwork, personality and behaviour, health and well-being, but also certain related to specific jobs, such as manual dexterity. However, the results differ from country to country.

The next question was whether athletes made some thought on how they intend to stop sports. If they have thought of an "exit strategy" from sport and when they consider the appropriate time to do so. It was revealed that athletes begin to think about their "exit strategy" from sports usually after a remarkable success in their career, so they want to work after leaving to sport-related jobs such as personal trainers or coaches. Consequently, it was concluded that athletes (present and former) live year after year in a world completely "disconnected" from the real labour market and are really worried about their future.

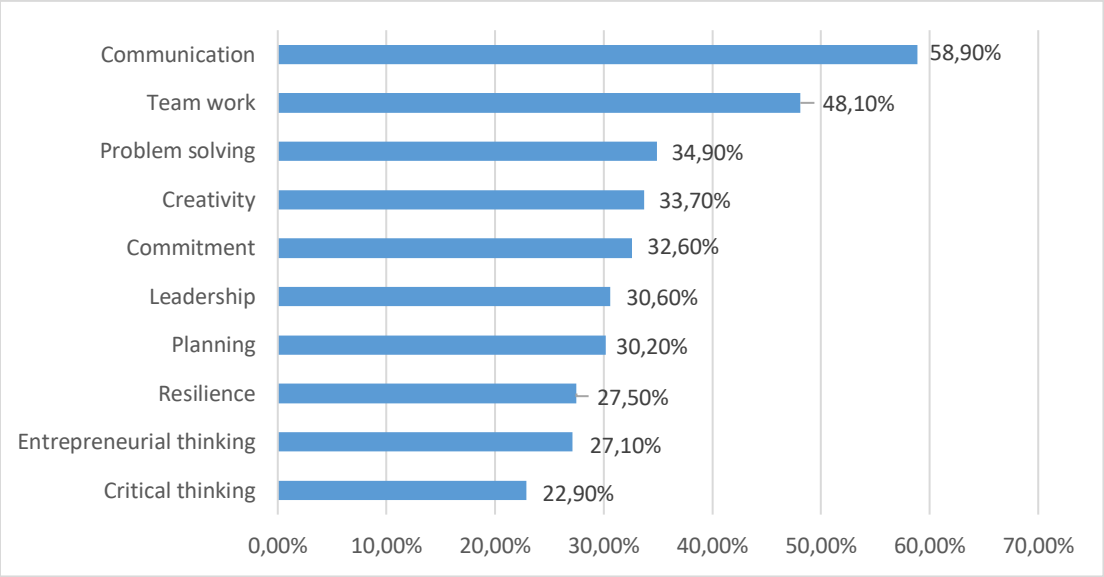

Figure 2. The most useful skills.

In general, the "social capital" being cultivated, which means that all the skills acquired by athletes during their athletic career are crucial and, in many cases, act as "substitutes" for the lack of dual careers, which is not supported from an institutional framework that is promoted by Institutes and Federations.

Whether sporting experiences could be considered as important values for life and whether one of these values could be useful to business, the answer was positive for most of the sample. Companies, benefit from recruiting these high-quality workers who have accumulated extraordinary skills, combined with the determination to excel in what they do.

Both questionnaires and interviews carried out in the framework of this project confirm the assumptions of Sport Employs YOUrope (2014) that non-formal education in sport fights youth unemployment raises their level of income and makes them more optimistic and willing to volunteer in the community. Youth work (non-formal learning) enables young people to develop the entrepreneurial skills that are important in their daily lives, in the workplace, and when establishing a social or commercial activity. However, the role of youth work in sport context fostering entrepreneurial learning has rarely been a topic of inquiry in its own right. The relationship between the two has been either assumed or contested, but not thoroughly examined.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether athletes acquire any skills from their involvement in sport that they can transfer in their profession after they finish their sporting career.

The main conclusion that emerged was that from their sporting career athletes acquire the following skills: communication, team work, problem solving, creativity, commitment, leadership, planning, resilience, entrepreneurial thinking, critical thinking, as well discipline, psychological endurance, willingness to win, fair play, respect, will, resistance to high pressure, organization, skill, goal achievement, responsibility, willingness, self-confidence and perseverance in smaller percent. These skills vary according to the sport

and are used depending on the type of work they have chosen to work on. The athletes who realize it and use these skills make their transition to the labour market easier.

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